

In Confidence

Office of the Associate Minister of Health
Office of the Minister for Research, Science & Innovation
Office of the Minister for COVID-19 Response

Chair, Cabinet

Report to Cabinet: Associate Minister of Health travel to Singapore and Europe, 9 to 23 October

Proposal

- 1 I recommend that Cabinet note this report on my travel to Singapore and Europe from 9 October 2022 to 23 October 2022.

Report

- 2 I achieved three main objectives:
 - 2.1 The primary purpose of this travel was to attend the 2022 World Cancer Congress in Geneva, Switzerland and to speak at the flagship plenary session highlighting Aotearoa New Zealand's reforms in tobacco control.
 - 2.2 I attended the Global Mental Health Summit in Rome, Italy on behalf of the Minister of Health, Hon Andrew Little, and demonstrate Aotearoa New Zealand's commitment to mental health.
 - 2.3 I sought support from European counterparts for Aotearoa New Zealand's membership to Horizon Europe, the European Union's key funding programme for research and innovation.

Singapore, 9 to 11 October 2022

Meeting with Minister of Health, Ong Ye Kung

- 3 I met with Singapore's Minister of Health, Ong Ye Kung, to discuss our ongoing cooperation on COVID-19 and acknowledged the considerable value of exchanges between Aotearoa New Zealand and Singaporean officials. We discussed the desirability for deepened cooperation on pandemic preparedness.
- 4 Singapore is about to embark on a reform of their health care system, *Healthier Singapore*, with a focus on shifting the emphasis to preventative care given challenges associated with a rapidly ageing population. I shared the Aotearoa New Zealand experience of our recent health reforms.

Pandemic Preparedness

- 5 I met with the Senior Minister of State for Health, Janil Puthuchery, and the Executive Director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, Professor Leo Yee Sin and explored key features of Singapore's pandemic preparedness plan including analytics and modelling, clinical research, and biorepositories.
- 6 Discussions with senior health officials, Associate Professor Vernon Lee (Director of Communicable Disease at Ministry of Health), Dr Derrick Heng (Deputy Director of Medical Services at MoH) and Professor Dale Fisher (infectious disease expert and member of the GOARN steering committee from 2013 - 2021), explored pandemic preparedness beyond COVID-19, and Singapore's plans to set up a stand-alone pandemic preparedness agency. The recent growth in Singapore's biopharmaceutical sector, its small population and commitment to free trade, Singapore will be able to act as a hub to ensure medical supply chains remain open during future pandemics.

Exploring collaboration in research and innovation

- 7 As Minister for Research, Science and Innovation, I met with the Permanent Secretary, Chan Lai Fung, and Chief Executive Officer, Beh Kian Teik, of Singapore's National Research Foundation (NRF), a department within the Prime Minister's Office that sets the national direction for Singapore's research and development. I explained the major reform of Aotearoa New Zealand's research, science and innovation system (called Te Ara Paerangi – Future Pathways), focusing on enhancing the connections between science and industry as well as increasing innovation.
- 8 I acknowledged that the initial set of jointly funded research collaborations between our countries (future foods and data science) were already bearing fruit, and opportunities to explore additional areas for collaboration.

Tobacco Control

- 9 I delivered a key note address at the National University of Singapore Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, where I outlined New Zealand's Smokefree Aotearoa 2025 Action Plan and highlighted the partnership between researchers and policy makers in tobacco control.

Rome, Italy, 12 to 16 October 2022

Bilateral meetings with Ministers

- 10 I met with the outgoing Minister of Health, Roberto Speranza where I thanked the Minister for the contribution of Italy's experience with COVID-19 that supported Aotearoa New Zealand's response. We explored the window of opportunity we have following COVID-19 to further invest in health, the potential for greater linkages to research, and to further strengthen the role of the World Health Organization.

- 11 In a meeting with the Minister of University and Research, Maria Cristina Messa, I discussed Te Ara Paerangi – Future Pathways reform, and discussed the Italian approach to setting a national research plan, priorities and missions. Italy is keen to explore greater mobility for researchers and students between our two countries, including opportunities for Aotearoa New Zealand students to study in Italy (including for the Arts). There are also opportunities for the sustainable blue economy for marine and maritime. The Minister was supportive of our application for association to Horizon Europe.

Global Mental Health Summit

- 12 On behalf of the Minister of Health, I represented Aotearoa New Zealand at the Global Mental Health Summit, which had the main themes of community-focused approaches, involving people with lived experience, and an emphasis on human rights and dignity.
- 13 I presented Aotearoa New Zealand's country statement to the Summit, committing to the long-term vision of an equitable and thriving country where mental wellbeing is promoted and protected. I emphasised the importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, work done in mental health to date, and further action underway.
- 14 During the meeting I had pull-aside meetings with the State Secretary of Health from Norway, Ellen Ronning-Arnesen, South Africa's Deputy Minister of Health, Sibongisile Maxwell Dhimo, Canadian Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, Hon Carolyn Bennett, and British Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Care, Dr Caroline Johnson. We discussed areas of mutual interest including maternity and maternal mental health, Aotearoa New Zealand's health reforms, and tobacco control.

Paris and Strasbourg, France, 16 to 18 October 2022

Horizon Europe

- 15 Our application for association with Horizon Europe was discussed in a meeting with Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, resulting in a joint announcement that Aotearoa New Zealand is moving towards formal negotiations with the EU.
- 16 The French Minister of Higher Education and Research, Professor Sylvie Retailleau, provided her support for Aotearoa New Zealand's entry into Horizon Europe. This is an opportunity for further collaboration between our two countries, and can build on existing long-term relationships. The Minister extended an invitation to join a multilateral dialogue on reciprocity and values.
- 17 A number of bilateral meetings were held at the European Parliament in Strasbourg where the Members of Parliament I met with were very supportive of Aotearoa New Zealand's application for association to Horizon Europe, and were keen to see this finalised in due course.

Research, Science and Innovation

- 18 Meetings with Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) representatives Kerri-Ann Jones and Andrew Wyckoff offered support for our science reforms, insight into the approach to mission-oriented innovation policies, and a discussion on research and development tax incentives internationally.

COVID-19

- 19 I was invited to present to the European Parliament Special Committee on Aotearoa New Zealand's response to COVID-19 where Members of the European Parliament had the opportunity to ask about our experience of the pandemic, our future plans, and broader preparedness activities.

Geneva, Switzerland, 19 to 21 October 2022

Smokefree 2025

- 20 I represented Aotearoa New Zealand at the World Cancer Congress on 19-20 October, and gave a keynote address on our pathway to becoming smokefree by 2025. There was considerable interest in the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products (Smoked Tobacco) Amendment Bill and in how it would prevent tamariki born after 2009 from ever being able to legally purchase cigarettes, restrict the number of retailers able to sell tobacco products, and reduce the amount of nicotine in tobacco products. During the Congress I engaged with European policy-makers at a Law and Tobacco workshop.
- 21 I also met Dr Adriana Blanco, Head of the Secretariat of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. We discussed Aotearoa New Zealand's approach to the regulation of vaping and the evolving science in this area. Dr Blanco applauded our commitment to reducing the harms of smoking and our equity-led approach, noting that we were global frontrunners on this issue and encouraged us to go further in restricting access to vaping products.

COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness

- 22 A highlight of my programme was meeting with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Director of the Health Emergencies Programme Dr Mike Ryan. This engagement built on those between the Director General and Ministers Mahuta and Little earlier in the year. The Director General reiterated his commendation of our government leadership and clear communication throughout the pandemic. He thanked us for our continued and constructive engagement in global efforts to strengthen pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. Countries now needed to focus on integrating COVID-19 response into their general public health work, while staying alert to changes in the virus.
- 23 Dr Ryan discussed the importance of continued surveillance to detect new variants of COVID-19 as they arose. While most infections were still from the Omicron lineage, there was an 'alphabet soup of variants out there'. As vaccines may become less

protective against contracting COVID-19, Dr Ryan emphasised the importance of early delivery of antivirals to high-risk cases. I described how we had leveraged our contact tracing system to identify high-risk individuals and proactively offer antivirals, a move Dr Ryan applauded.

- 24 Director General Tedros observed that much of the harm caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was due to underlying inequalities ‘baked into the system’ at global and national levels. Addressing inequity and strengthening health systems were key pandemic preparedness measures that the WHO believed needed to be addressed in the negotiations under way in Geneva for a Pandemic Instrument. The Director General welcomed Aotearoa New Zealand’s principled yet pragmatic approach to these negotiations. I reiterated our support for new equity measures in the Pandemic Instrument, alongside better information-sharing mechanisms and a One Health approach.
- 25 We also discussed the WHO’s efforts to prevent sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and the allegations of bullying against the Regional Director of the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office. I welcomed the work the WHO had done to start improving structures and processes for handling misconduct allegations and reiterated our high expectations and commitment to supporting further efforts.

Global vaccination efforts

- 26 I met Dr Seth Berkley, Chief Executive of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, to discuss global vaccination efforts and future pandemic preparedness. Gavi is a key development partner for routine immunisations and administered the COVAX Facility, which acted as a group purchaser and distributor of COVID-19 vaccines. Dr Berkley provided thanks to Aotearoa New Zealand for ‘coming in with gusto’ to support COVAX as soon as it was established during the pandemic, and for our continued support for COVID-19 vaccination efforts in the Pacific.

Proactive Release

- 27 I propose that this paper be proactively released with any appropriate redactions in accordance with Cabinet Circular CO (18) 4.

Recommendations

- 28 I recommend that Cabinet note this report.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall
Associate Minister of Health
Minister of Research, Science and Innovation